

# **The Bravest Squirrel Ever**

by Sara Shafer

Smashwords Edition

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## **Dedication**

*For the real Natalie, who loves all animals and was excited about this book from the very beginning.*

## **Chapter 1**

### MAX'S DISCOVERY

“I’m going to be the bravest squirrel ever, just like Uncle Louie,” Max bragged from his perch on the highest tree branch.

“Uncle Louie flopped.” Lana nibbled on an acorn from the pile in front of her. “Do you want to get caught in a trap and flop?”

“I won’t flop. I’m too smart and too fast. I’m going to steal every single seed the humans put out. They’ll never catch me.”

“But Mama said we can’t go near those seeds.”

Pippi covered her head with her paws as her brother and sister argued on the branches above her. Unlike Uncle Louie, the champion birdseed eater of all time, she wasn’t brave enough to climb on a birdfeeder. And flopping scared her even more.

She peeked through her claws as lightning flashed in the distance. Immediately, she ducked but couldn’t get away from the awful thundering noise. The sound reminded her of the truck that had taken away the bag with Uncle Louie flopping around inside.

“We have to build our own nests. It’s going to rain soon.” Lana glanced at the dark sky. Then she picked up another acorn and shoved the whole thing in her mouth.

“Uncle Louie said sticks and leaves make leaky homes,” Max said. “I’m not living in anything that leaks.”

“We could go back to Mama’s hollow tree,” Pippi suggested. With Mama, she didn’t have to worry about scary noises, and she always stayed warm and cozy.

Lana shook her head and pushed the acorn against the inside of her cheek so she could talk. “We’re big kids now. I don’t care what Uncle Louie said. We have to build our own nests.”

“I’m not going to,” Max announced. “I’ll find a dry, warm place, something bigger and better than Mama’s hollow tree.”

“Well, you better find it quickly because the rain is almost here.”

Max scampered down the tree, jumped onto a fence and ran along the top.

Pippi watched him until drops of rain blew into her eyes and she couldn't see him anymore. She tried to hold her tail like an umbrella over her body to stay dry.

"Help me get some sticks for a nest," Lana said.

Spotting one at the bottom of the tree, Pippi dug her claws into the bark to run down headfirst, but she couldn't run with her tail over her head. The rain splattered against her face and inside her ears.

She ran faster, but the rain splashed harder. With the stick between her teeth, she dashed up the tree trunk to Lana's branch, her fur sopping wet.

Shivering, she held out the stick to her sister. Lightning flashed much brighter this time, followed by a crack of thunder so loud Pippi jumped. The stick fell all the way to the ground.

Lana didn't notice. Huddled against the tree trunk with her stack of acorns, she nibbled on one after another while staring at the sky.

A gust of wind roared through the treetops. The branch shook, rattling Lana's acorns. She caught one, but the rest rolled to the ground.

Trying not to fall in the strong wind, Pippi squeaked and hugged Lana's back.

"Ow! You're clawing me." Lana batted her with her paw and then shoved the last acorn in her mouth.

"Sorry." She pulled her claws back but kept her paws on her sister's fur. She hadn't meant to hurt Lana. But the lightning, thunder and wind scared her. Plus, she was soaking wet. And cold.

"Keep your tail up, and cuddle with me," Lana said. "We'll stay warmer and drier if we're together."

Letting the rain soak them didn't seem like a good plan for staying warm and dry. "Let's go see Mama."

"We can't. We're old enough to take care of ourselves."

A water droplet hit Pippi in the eye. The rain poured so hard her tail umbrella created a giant waterfall down her back. "I could help Mama with her new babies."

"She doesn't need your help."

But Pippi needed her. Light flashed, hurting her eyes with the intense brightness. The giant thundering hurt her ears. She dug her claws in again. Lana didn't yell or hit her this time. She sat frozen on the branch.

Pippi ran headfirst down the tree, tripping on the acorns scattered in the wet grass at the bottom. She rolled onto her back, then flipped over and jumped up, running through the wet grass to the fence.

A stick fell, bouncing off the fence and scraping her cheek. The branch over her head hung low like it might break off and crush her. She had to get away from here.

Dashing off the fence, she zigzagged across the yard until she came to another tree. If she went all the way to the top, no sticks could fall on her.

So, she did. But clinging to the wet bark at the top, she didn't feel safer. The branches shook more than when she'd cuddled with Lana. The lightning flashed brighter. The thunder boomed louder.

"Help me."

But no one did. No one could hear her. She couldn't see Mama's nest or Lana's tree. She was lost.

The shaking branch scraped against something. She blinked away her tears to study it. The end of the branch rubbed the top of a building. Now she had to worry about humans too.

She lay flat on her perch and stared at the building. No matter how much the wind blew and the branch slapped at it, the building didn't move. For the first time in her life, a human thing seemed like the safest place.

Pippi jumped on top of the roof next to a metal pipe sticking out of the building.

Suddenly, a squirrel head popped up from the pipe. She screamed and clawed backwards.

The rest of its body jumped out. The squirrel was alive. Max! "Hey Pippi, come check this out."

"Are you crazy?" She gasped. "I thought the people chopped your head off."

"They could never catch me. Come see the awesome nest I found."

"Is it in a tree like Mama's?" The rain pounded harder, making the

roof slippery. She dug her claws in as she took a couple steps toward her brother. She couldn't wait to get somewhere warm and dry.

"It's better than a tree," he promised.

"Pippi, where are you going?" Lana yelled from the tree branch.

Her sister had followed her. Instead of being alone, she had her siblings around her. Even though she hadn't found Mama, she felt safer.

"Max says he discovered a better nest than the hollow tree we grew up in," Pippi called. "Is it as dry and warm too?" she asked her brother.

Instead of answering, he scurried up the top of the brown pipe and then disappeared inside. Only his tail stuck out.

He couldn't have made a nest inside dangerous human territory.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"You're going to love it. Follow me." His voice echoed in the pipe.

"No," Lana shouted. "The humans will stuff you in a bag, and you'll flop around while they take you far away from here."

Pippi's heart beat fast, and her tail quivered. She didn't want to flop.

The tree branch shook so badly Lana sank her claws into the bark to hang on. Another raindrop hit Pippi in the eye. She couldn't stand being cold and wet any longer.

She put her tail over her head and glanced around for danger. With the terrible storm, the people left their territory unprotected. She lifted her front paws up to the top of the pipe and peered down the tube.

Inside, Max pulled at a piece of wire with his paws.

"Are you sure this is safe?" she asked.

He pulled the wire with all his strength and then wiggled underneath it. For a second, she studied his trembling tail. Then it disappeared too.

"Max!"

Lightning flashed. The booming sound vibrated through Pippi's body. "Max, are you alive?"

No answer.

"The humans trapped Max!" Lana cried.

## **Chapter 2**

### THE BEST NEST EVER

“Ahhh, help! I’m being eaten by humans!” Max screamed.

Then he laughed. “Nobody is going to trap me, you scaredy-rats. I’m warm and dry with no people anywhere.”

Pippi bit her claw as she looked at Lana. She couldn’t believe her brother could joke about the danger.

After Uncle Louie flopped, Mama had forbidden them to go into human territory. If Pippi followed Max, she might flop. Or she could stay outside and cuddle in the rain with Lana while a cold waterfall dripped off her tail onto her head.

Lightning shot out of the sky, followed by a humungous booming sound. Pippi jumped into the pipe and clawed at the wire. It scraped her cheek in the same spot where the branch had scratched her.

She lifted the wire high enough to stick her nose inside. Frantic to get away from the horrible noise and gigantic flashes of light, she tugged the hole bigger with her teeth, then wiggled her body to get through.

Rain stopped falling, and warm dry air surrounded her. She couldn’t see anything, so she used her paws and claws to feel her way. Moving her body out of the hole gave her enough light to see. She crawled upside-down on a piece of wood along the ceiling of the most gigantic nest she’d ever seen.

“What do you think?” Max’s voice came from below.

“I don’t know yet.” She jumped down next to her brother and landed on something softer and squishier than leaves. Dust puffed up and tickled her nose. She rubbed her paw over her sore cheek.

“Pippi? Max?” Lana’s voice sounded very faint outside the pipe.

“Don’t tell her where we are.” Max grinned. “She’ll be a party pooper.”

“I don’t know where we are,” Pippi said. She’d visited other nests besides Mama’s, but she’d never seen anything that didn’t get wet in the

rain or shake in the wind.

“We’re in the top of a human house. They call it an attic, and they never go in it.” Max knew all about the humans from sneaking out to follow Uncle Louie.

“What is this squishy stuff?”

“It’s insulation, kind of like foam. It keeps the house warm in the winter and cool in the summer.”

“Magic foam,” she murmured. “Okay Smartie, why are the branches all straight and smooth?”

“They aren’t branches. They’re boards made out of wood. The ones that make a ramp up to the ceiling are called rafters.”

“Whatever they’re called, they look perfect to run on.” She’d never seen a nest big enough to run in before. She’d never imagined such a thing existed. “Families of squirrels could live here, and no one would have move out when they grew up. It’s perfect.”

“Pippi, get out here right now, or I’m telling Mama,” Lana yelled.

“I told you she’s a party pooper,” Max grumbled.

Her sister had followed her across the wet grass, instead of abandoning her. Pippi couldn’t leave her alone in the rain with the scary flashes of light and booming noises.

She crawled up a slanting rafter to the ceiling. It ended a couple steps from the pipe that led to the outside. Digging her claws into a board, she twisted her body to look up the pipe.

Angry clouds swirled above her. She pushed her head under the hole in the wire mesh, spraying her fur with cold water. “Lana, you have to see this. It’s the best nest ever.”

“Get out of there. The humans will get you.” Her panicked voice came from somewhere close by.

Pippi wiggled all the way up the pipe. A raindrop hit her in the eye. She flipped her tail up umbrella-style again, already missing the warm, dry attic.

Lana trembled on the edge of the roof, ready to leap onto the tree branch. “Let’s go. Hurry.”

“No. You have to see this. There are no people,” she promised.

“Uncle Louie—”



“If he’d found this place, he never would have tried to make his home in the weird tunnel along the outside of the roof and got caught in a trap,” Max yelled from inside.

“Please come to the tree with me,” Lana begged. “It’s safer.”

Pippi didn’t want to disturb the people and end up like Uncle Louie. Spending the night cold and wet was better than flopping and being carried away in a bag. She crawled out of the pipe toward her sister.

A massive, bright lightning bolt shot across the gray sky. Pippi screeched and dashed for the nearest shelter—the pipe she’d just come out of. She tumbled down the hole. The horrible thunder echoed through the pipe, hurting her ears as she squeezed under the wire.

She scrambled along the long board that made a ramp from the ceiling to the floor and then jumped into the squishy stuff. Lying flat, she shivered, while Max crawled down another rafter and nibbled on a seed. Human territory might be dangerous, but outside was a lot scarier.

Scratching and rustling came from the pipe. A person was coming through the hole. If she didn’t hide fast, she’d fall into a trap and flop. She dug her claws into the insulation and glanced frantically for a hiding place.

“I’m just staying until the rain stops. Then I’m going to build my own nest.” Her sister clung to the wooden board with her claws.

“Lana!” she cried, too relieved to argue about building leaky nests when they could have all this warm dry space instead.

Max tucked his seed against the inside of his cheek and scampered toward Pippi. He whipped his fluffy tail across her face. “Tag! You’re *It*.” He dashed off.

She darted after him along the smooth boards and through the squishy foam until she trapped him in a corner. He tried to go sideways, but she swung her tail across his paw and scampered away. He started to run after her but changed directions and went toward Lana instead.

“Hey, I’m not playing,” she complained. Darting to the side, she laughed then shrieked as Max tagged her. Too busy nibbling on acorns and worrying, she hadn’t joined in anything fun since they’d moved out of Mama’s nest. But now she giggled and chased Max across the room.

They played for hours, long after the pitter-patter of rain on the

ceiling stopped. Finally, they collapsed into the insulation, too tired to move a paw or swoosh a tail.

When she awoke much later, Pippi had never felt happier. With no humans anywhere, they had no reason to be afraid, and the nest protected them from the cold and storms. The only thing she didn't like was the sun couldn't shine inside, making it dark all the time.

Over the next few days, she scampered outside during the day to enjoy the sunshine. But when night came, she snuck down the pipe to sleep.

No matter how gorgeous the weather, Max stayed inside, except to gather food from the birdfeeder. He stored it in a corner under the insulation and wouldn't let her go near.

Every day, Lana added leaves and rearranged sticks to make a nest in her favorite acorn tree. But no matter how hard she worked, her home leaked in the rain, so she went down the pipe to stay dry.

Pippi loved the rainy days where they played tag or hide-and-seek. Then at night they snuggled together to sleep. She wanted to stay like this forever.

As long as the humans never showed up.

### Chapter 3

#### HUMAN NOISES

Enjoying another perfect afternoon of hide-and-seek, Pippi huddled under the insulation while Max counted.

“Daddy, I hear something in the ceiling. Listen,” a person said from underneath the floor.

If she hadn’t been hiding, Pippi would have dashed up the pipe and out of the nest. But already out of sight, she felt safer not moving at all.

“I don’t hear anything,” a deeper human voice said. Even though he didn’t yell, his voice sounded like it could become loud and mean at any moment.

“But—” the nicer, smaller voice started.

“Not now. Your mother and I have a lot of unpacking to do from vacation.” His heavy footsteps moved away.

Pippi shivered. She did not want to meet the scary person.

“Ready or not, here I come,” Max shouted, not letting the noises below interrupt their game. “I see you, Pippi.”

Drat! Her tail stuck out and gave her away every time. She dashed out from her hiding place before he could tag her. As they scampered toward the big metal tube they used as home base, his breath brushed her back paws. She ran faster.

Unable to stop, she crashed against home base, making the tube boom long and deep like thunder. Trying not to slip off, she dug her claws against the metal, where they screeched across the surface.

“Dean, did you hear that?” a new human yelled, the voice so shrill it hurt Pippi’s ears.

She and Max froze. Lana popped her head up from her hiding spot, her black eyes wide with fear and her nose quivering. For a second, no one moved a muscle.

Max recovered first and dashed after Lana.

Pippi kept one paw on the base, shaking from ears to tail. Now the

humans would come with their traps and make all three of them flop.

“Are you hearing noises too, Honey?” the deeper voice from before asked. One human had called him Daddy, and other one called him Dean, so maybe his name was Daddy-Dean.

“I heard a big clunk and then an awful scraping sound from the vent fan over the stove,” Honey explained.

“Turn it on,” Daddy-Dean said. “If something’s inside, maybe it will blow out.”

A huge whoosh swelled from underneath where Pippi stood all the way up the metal tube, vibrating her paw. She shrieked and scampered away.

She jumped over a board and wedged her head under the insulation, then counted her paws. One, two, three, four. Yes, she had them all and could still feel her tail. The sound had scared her out of her mind but hadn’t hurt her.

Max flicked her with his tail. “Got you. You’re *It*.”

The whooshing from the vent stopped. Silence filled the dark nest. Pippi pulled her head out of the foam and glared at him. “That’s not fair. Didn’t you hear what the humans did?”

“Scaredy-rat,” he teased.

Pippi hated that name. “Fine, I’ll count.”

“How could a human make that noise?” Lana asked from the corner, lifting a seed to her mouth and nibbling.

“Hey,” Max shouted. “Put my food down.”

She spat the seed in her paw and looked up. “Sorry. Talking about people makes me nervous. When I’m nervous, I eat.”

“Eat your own seeds. I’m saving mine for winter. Both of you can stop worrying about the humans. They’re too big to fit through the pipe in the roof, so they can’t get in.”

Pippi relaxed. Max was right. They had run along every board, sniffed every corner, and clawed at every place where light got in. If there had been another hole, they would have found it.

She didn’t need to be scared. Even though she could hear the people and they could hear her, they couldn’t get her.

Over the next few days, the humans became more active. They talked

about ‘the creatures in the attic.’ They argued over whether Pippi and her siblings were mice or birds or raccoons. Max found it funny to act like whatever animal they were talking about.

Lana didn’t think he was funny. She especially didn’t like how every time they bumped into the metal tube, the humans turned on the whooshing noise. She spent less and less time in the nest. Whenever she did visit, she worried about every sound and ate Max’s food, making him mad.

“I have a new game,” he announced one afternoon after he and Lana argued and she ran outside.

“What?” Tired of tag and hide-and-seek, Pippi wanted to do something different. All the good games needed more than two squirrels to be fun.

“Whenever we hear a girl voice, we make noise on purpose.” He shot her his troublemaking grin.

“Even the shrill Mother-Honey voice that hurts my ears?”

He nodded. “Scratch and claw and yip. Then when Daddy-Dean talks, stay as quiet as possible until he walks away.”

She gulped. Her heart thudded in her ears. This didn’t sound fun. It sounded scary. Even though the humans couldn’t get her, they still freaked her out. But she didn’t want Max to know. She hated when he made fun of her. “Okay.”

They ran along the boards, and soon Mother-Honey yelled, “Dean, they’re at it again.”

Max grinned, scratched the wood, and chattered his teeth.

“Dean!” She screeched so loud Pippi covered her ears with her paws.

“Come on. Help me,” Max said.

With her ears covered, she didn’t have a free front paw to scratch with. Slowly, she uncovered one ear and reached toward the floor.

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” Daddy-Dean grumbled. “Where do you hear it this time?”

Pippi snatched up her paw.

“Right above your head,” Mother-Honey said.

Pippi and Max stared at each other. His ears and tail twitched as he tried not to laugh. The silence stretched for so long she could hardly

stand it. Eyes bulging, Max held his breath.

“You’re hearing things. There’s nothing up there,” Daddy-Dean muttered.

Holding her tail over her mouth, Pippi tried not to laugh out loud.

“Something’s in our attic. Natalie heard it too. You have to check it out,” Mother-Honey insisted.

“You’re crazy, both you and Natalie.” His voice faded away.

Max let out his breath and shouted his loudest whoop. He held out his paw and high-fived Pippi. They jumped into the insulation, laughing and wrestling until they were too tired to move.

No longer freaked out by the humans, Pippi played the game every day. She and Max had the most fun ever.

Lana didn’t share in their fun. She still thought the people would trap them and make them flop.

## Chapter 4

### THE MYSTERIOUS HOLE

A couple days later, when the girl talked, Pippi grinned at Max and lifted the insulation over her head. Using two paws, she scratched on the bottom of the nest.

A moment later, the floor underneath her vibrated with a hard knocking sound.

Pippi jumped. Nothing had ever scratched back before. Ears quivering, she pushed the foam and studied the giant board, flat and wide for as far as she could see. Scraping with one claw, she sniffed the dry, dusty wood.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Pippi shrieked and scurried onto a rafter.

Max laughed. "Scaredy-rat."

"I'm not scared. It just surprised me." Her heart raced. She'd thought the floor had been about to collapse but couldn't let him guess her fears. He'd tease her for weeks.

She marched to the spot where the banging came from. Pushing away the foam, she scratched the floor with both front paws.

Underneath her, Natalie screamed. "Mother, it scratched back. Listen."

"It's warm and sunny outside," Lana said from the ceiling pipe at the top of the nest. "Our cousins are playing Red Rover. Want to come out and play?" She looked from Max to Pippi. "What are you doing?"

Before Pippi could answer, pounding vibrated through her paws. Her heart thudded almost as loudly, but she managed not to freak out and run away. She might not be able to see the humans, but they seemed close enough to grab her. She lifted her paw to scratch.

"Don't do it," Lana shouted. "Never tease the people. Do you want to end up like Uncle Louie? Mama says you have to let them think you're more scared of them than they are of you so they'll leave you alone."

Max smirked. He wasn't afraid, and he'd never pretend for them. If Pippi showed fear, he'd call her a scaredy-rat again. The humans couldn't get her in here, but she had to face her brother all the time. She scratched the floor as hard and fast as she could.

"Well, what do you know? There is something up there," Daddy-Dean boomed.

She jumped back. Natalie had called for Mother-Honey, not Daddy-Dean.

"I told you so," Natalie and Lana said at the same time.

"Pippi, you ruined the game," Max complained.

"But—" Her throat tightened, and tears blurred her eyes. She didn't know Daddy-Dean would hear her, and if she hadn't scratched, Max would have made fun of her for being scared.

"If we don't get the creature out, it will chew up the wires and destroy the house," Mother-Honey said. So, she had come when Natalie called. Pippi just had the bad luck that Daddy-Dean came too and ruined everything.

"Heaven forbid if it dies up there," Mother-Honey continued.

Pippi shivered. Could she really die in this safe, warm nest?

"I'll look in the attic," Daddy-Dean said. "But I can only stay there for a couple minutes. The insulation gives my asthma fits."

"Find out what kind of animal it is," Mother-Honey said. "I'll call my cousin Fred to take care of it this weekend."

Pippi didn't know what she meant by 'take care of it.' They'd been taking care of themselves and didn't need a human's help. Just the thought of one close enough to touch her made her shiver in fear.

"We have to get out of here," Lana said. She turned around on the ramp to face the pipe again.

"No." More than anything, Pippi wanted to run away too. But they couldn't go that way. "Daddy-Dean is going to come in. You'll get stuck in the pipe with him."

Lana scrambled away from the hole in the ceiling. "I thought the humans couldn't fit in there." She glanced at Max's food pile and nibbled on one of her claws.

"I didn't think he could. But he said he was coming in, and that's the



only hole, so people must have a special way to squeeze through tiny pipes.”

Lana raced down the rafter, dropped into the foam, and ran to the farthest corner. “What do we do?”

When a human approached, they were supposed to run. But what could they do if they couldn’t run away like Mama had taught them? The only squirrel who hadn’t run was Uncle Louie, and he flopped.

“You stay out of my food.” Max growled at Lana.

“I wasn’t—” She stopped and looked at the acorn in her paws. “Just one. Please Max. If the humans get you, you won’t need this extra food.”

He scampered to her and knocked the acorn out of her paws. “We’re not going to get caught. We’re going to hide. When Daddy-Dean leaves, we’ll come out of our hiding place. He’ll never know we were here.”

THUMP!

Pippi jumped, so terrified she couldn’t tell if the sound came from underneath or above her. Max ran and burrowed under the insulation. Pippi dashed in the opposite direction, so he wouldn’t see how scared she was and tease her later.

She crawled under the foam too, but she couldn’t remember which direction Lana went, so she stuck her head out to look. Her sister still stood in the same spot, hugging her tail around her and shaking.

“Hide,” Pippi whispered as loudly as she dared.

“We never should have come here,” she cried into her tail. “I knew this was a bad idea.”

“Be quiet. Hide.”

BUMP! THUMP!

The noises sounded louder and came from below them, not up on the roof.

Pippi ran to Lana and pushed her down. Then she pulled the foam insulation over both of them with her teeth. The thumping continued, followed by a terrible creak. The entire floor shook.

Lana whimpered, but Pippi was too scared to comfort her.

The floor vibrated as if a human were coming up through it, but the awful sounds had to be from a person trying to fit down the tiny pipe in the roof. The creaking and shaking surely meant he was breaking the entire

building.

She peeked through the foam. If the building broke, they'd have a new hole in the ceiling to escape through.

Bright light filled the nest, the light coming from five steps away where a square of the floor rose into the air. Human hands (because according to Uncle Louie, people didn't have paws) followed the square up, lifting it higher, then shifting it toward Pippi's hiding spot.

The piece of floor lowered on top of the insulation, inches from crushing her. This place was more dangerous than Lana's worst predictions. Instead of getting trapped and flopping in a bag, they could be squashed to death. If Pippi got out alive, she'd never, ever come back.

"The humans have a secret entrance," Lana whispered, nibbling on her claws. "They're not coming in our pipe."

Which meant the squirrels didn't have to keep hiding and hope Daddy-Dean didn't discover them. They could get out now. Pippi clamped her paw over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud with relief.

The light from the new hole suddenly went away, plunging the nest into darkness. An awful, humungous shadow rose through the floor. Daddy-Dean sounded scary and looked even scarier.

She crouched as low as she could. Next to her, Lana sniffled, shaking so hard the human would notice the insulation moving.

Pippi dug her claws into Lana's fur to make her stop. "He's slow. We can outrun him and make it out of here safely."

"Hand me the flashlight," Daddy-Dean boomed. After some scuffling, a bright band of light flashed over the area where Max hid.

Pippi lay as still as she could. She tried not to twitch her tail or ears, but her fur poked through insulation. Once Daddy-Dean noticed, they were so close to the hole he could reach over and crush them with his giant feet.

"On the count of three, we're going to run for the pipe," she whispered. "Ready?"

Lana shook her head no.

Pippi didn't have time to argue. The light swung toward them. Lana had to run whether she wanted to or not. "One, two, three."

Just before the light reached them, Pippi jumped up, digging her back claws into her sister's shoulders to make her move. Then she took off across the insulation toward the ramp to the ceiling.

The bright beam of light shone on her.

"It's a squirrel," Daddy-Dean shouted. "Honey, do we still have Fred's trap?"

## Chapter 5

### FINE

Pippi ran faster than she'd ever run in her life, so she wouldn't become trapped and flop in a sack like Uncle Louie. She didn't want to be carried off to the country and surrounded by mean animals that ate squirrels for breakfast.

She wiggled under the wire and up the metal pipe. At the edge of the roof she paused to catch her breath. "Lana, we made it."

No answer.

"Lana?" She turned around and looked, but she was alone. Lana should have been right behind her. Had the human grabbed her? What if she flopped and Pippi never saw her again?

Turning around, she tiptoed to the pipe and crawled inside and under the wire. "Lana?" she whispered.

Daddy-Dean rose out of the hole in the floor. He coughed, making the beam of his flashlight bob up and down on the wall. Lana sat frozen, half-covered by insulation, right where Pippi had left her. If Daddy-Dean looked down, he could pick her up with his bare hands.

"Fred took his trap home after he caught the squirrel in the soffit," Mother-Honey yelled.

Pippi wiggled out of the pipe and into the attic, clinging to the ceiling with her claws.

"What's a soffit?" Natalie asked from down below.

"The metal overhang around the outside of the house just under the roof," Mother-Honey explained. "We found a hole in it before we went on vacation, but Fred got rid of the animal and fixed the hole."

While Lana sat in plain sight, the humans talked about getting rid of them. Pippi didn't know what to do, but she had to think of something.

The bright flashlight shone into her eyes. "Hey, the little bugger's up by the air vent in the roof," Daddy-Dean said, lifting his entire body into the nest. He was so big he had to hunch over, and his head still brushed

the ceiling. He stepped forward, making the floor creak and groan.

His foot stepped down so close to Lana's head she could have put bite marks on his black boot. But she didn't bite him. She didn't move at all.

Daddy-Dean started to point his light down at his feet. Pippi flipped her tail, and he pointed the flashlight at her before he had a chance to look down. Glancing at the pipe, she made sure she could get out before he reached her. He took a thumping step across the floor.

Even though she could dodge and run fast, Pippi took a step toward the pipe. Daddy-Dean might be slow and clumsy, but he was still gigantic. If he got any closer, she'd run for safety.

He stopped and half-gasped, half-coughed. Then he turned his flashlight and his body away and walked straight toward Lana.

Pippi flicked her tail and chattered, but he didn't glance to her, nearly stepping on Lana. "Bring me my inhaler," he shouted down the hole.

"Come out of the attic," Mother-Honey pleaded from below. "It's not good for you. I'll call Fred to take care of it. He enjoyed getting rid of the last squirrel."

Tail and ears trembling, Pippi dug her claws deeper into the board at the ceiling. Fred had trapped Uncle Louie, and now he would make them flop.

Daddy-Dean put his legs down the hole, then most of his body. He turned off the flashlight and passed it to Mother-Honey. Then he reached across the darkened nest for the piece of floor.

His hand almost brushed Lana's fur. Either his eyes weren't good enough to see her, or he was too busy coughing and gasping to notice. She stayed so still Pippi worried she might be dead.

Daddy-Dean's ferocious head disappeared down the mysterious hole. The piece of floor shifted over the opening, cutting off the last of the light.

For a few seconds Pippi didn't dare move. The floor could lift again, and he could reappear. Or worse, Fred could come up with his trap.

The thumping and voices gradually faded away. She dropped down on the insulation. "He's gone."

Max started rustling, but Lana didn't move.

“That was awesome!” Max dashed to the middle of the nest.

“Are you crazy? They want to make us flop. Let’s get out of here.”

Lana finally lifted her head.

So relieved her sister wasn’t dead, Pippi almost laughed.

Max did laugh. “The human shined his light on me and didn’t know I was here. I’m too smart for him to trap me.”

Lana crawled up the ramp to the ceiling. “I’m leaving, and I’m never coming back. You should too if you know what’s good for you.”

“Scaredy-rat,” he called.

“I’d rather be a free scaredy-rat than a flopped Max.” She wiggled through the hole, up the pipe, and disappeared.

Pippi stared after her. Lana didn’t care about the names her brother called her. She’d chosen to be safe, even if he teased her forever.

“Maybe she’s right,” Pippi said. “Daddy-Dean saw me, and now he’s sending the person who got Uncle Louie to trap us.”

“If you’d stayed hidden like you were supposed to, that wouldn’t have happened,” Max said.

She’d been trying to keep Lana safe. But did anyone thank her? No, they blamed her instead. It wasn’t fair. “Since Daddy-Dean didn’t come in through the pipe, I thought we could escape. Lana was so scared. I wanted to help her get out. I thought she’d run out with me.”

“Escape?” Max laughed the meanest laugh Pippi had ever heard. “Are you still scared of the humans?”

So what if she was? She didn’t care if he called her a scaredy-rat anymore. Lana was right. She’d rather be a scaredy-rat than a flopped Max. But she didn’t want him to flop. She wanted him to leave with her so he could stay safe too. “It’s too dangerous in here. I’m leaving. You have to come with me.”

“Never. You’ll be sorry when it rains. If you leave, I won’t let you come back. I’m not sharing my nest with scaredy-rats.”

“Fine.” Pippi stomped her paw. “Don’t expect me to visit you after you flop.”

“Fine,” Max shouted. “Go away.”

“Fine, I will.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

## **Chapter 6**

### **SCAREDY-RAT**

Pippi and Max stared at each other for a long time. Then he stuck his tail in the air and trotted to his special corner. He picked up a seed and started eating.

She crawled slowly up the rafter while he stuffed his mouth with seeds, ignoring her. She jumped to the ceiling and clung there, looking down. She might never see her brother again. Would the humans take him to the same place they took Uncle Louie after he flopped? Or would he be all alone surrounded by mean, hungry animals?

Pippi might be a scaredy-rat, but she wasn't stupid enough to end up flopped. "Goodbye, Max," she whispered.

He didn't answer, so she crawled along the ceiling, wiggled under the wire and up the pipe. She blinked into the sunlight and waited for her eyes to adjust to the brightness. Then she jumped onto the roof.

"Pippi, are you okay?" Lana called from the tree branch where she crouched against the trunk, hugging her tail.

"I'm okay." She ran across the roof and jumped onto the end of the branch.

"Is Max coming?"

Thinking about her brother made her mad and sad and scared again. "He says he's not afraid of the humans. Since we are, he won't let us in the nest with him."

"I'm never going back in that awful place, anyway," Lana sobbed. "I wish we'd never discovered it."

Pippi hugged her sister, afraid for Max and relieved they'd gotten out without flopping.

Lana wiped her tears with her tail. "Stay in my nest with me. I don't want to be alone."

"Me either." They crawled to Lana's tree and curled next to each other.



“You can share my home all winter if you help me hunt for acorns and seeds.” Lana sniffled.

“Okay.” Pippi wrapped her tail around her until her sister fell asleep. She stared through the hole in the side of the nest at the bright, sunny day. Their cousins chattered as they played Red Rover in the next yard.

But the light and noise didn’t keep her awake. From this high up, she could see the human building and all the machines driving down the street. Every time a truck rumbled by, she jumped with fear that Fred had arrived to flop Max.

For the rest of the day and all of the next, only Mother-Honey and Daddy-Dean parked their machines at the house. Lana stopped crying, and Pippi stopped panicking every time a truck drove by.

Together they began gathering food for the winter. Pippi was carrying an acorn up the tree when she heard a rattling, banging sound. She dashed to her lookout hole between the sticks in the nest.

“Give me the acorn,” Lana said.

Without glancing away from the truck rolling to a stop in front of the building, Pippi dropped the food.

“Hey. Watch what you’re doing.”

The acorn rolled along the edge of the nest. Lana lunged for it, but it fell to the ground before she could catch it.

Through the peephole, the door to the noisy truck opened. A human with an angry face and big brown boots stepped out. He covered his hands with big, thick gloves and then marched toward the house.

Pippi’s stomach churned like she’d eaten a rotten acorn. The horrible, scariest-of-all human she’d hoped would never come had arrived. Fred had come to make Max flop.

“Stop dropping the acorns. We don’t have nearly enough to last the winter,” Lana said.

“Who cares about acorns? I have to get Max to safety before it’s too late.” She scampered down the tree as fast as she could.

As she ran along the fence and across the yard, Mama peeked out of the hole in her hollow tree. “Pippi, have you made your own nest yet?”

At any other time, she would have been overcome with excitement and given Mama a big hug, but she was on a serious mission. “I can’t

talk now.”

Mama came all the way out of the hole and blocked her path. “You have to stop playing. You’re a big girl. You have to gather food and make a home before winter.”

“I have to save Max first. He’s in trouble. Can you help me?”

Crying and whimpering came from the hole. Mama sighed, looking tired and lonely. “The babies are always hungry, and they never sleep. Whatever trouble Max is in, he can take care of himself. I have enough to worry about with the babies, but I worry about you too.”

Mama disappeared into her hole, too busy with the babies to help. It was up to Pippi to warn Max before Fred got him. She dashed to the tree near the building, past the birdfeeder, and up to the branch that went over the roof. She scampered out and jumped on the roof, running to the pipe. Cautiously, she crawled down and poked her head under the wire.

“Nothing’s in here now.” A deep human voice echoed across the nest. “I’ll check the roof and seal up any holes so nothing can get in again.”

Pippi peeked her head inside. A faint light glowed from the hole in the floor, then vanished. The human had left and sealed the hole, making it safe for her to enter.

He’d been wrong about nothing being in the nest. Max was the best hider she knew. He was here somewhere. Even if he’d stayed in plain sight, Fred probably would have missed him, just like Daddy-Dean had missed Lana.

“Pippi, what are you doing?” Lana called through the top of the pipe.

She turned and wiggled up to the outside. Her sister sat on the branch over the roof, munching on an acorn and trembling.

“I need to find Max.”

“You promised you wouldn’t go down there again.”

“This is different. It’s a rescue mission. A human is going to do something to the pipe. I heard him say so. Max has to get out before Fred comes. You keep watch and tell me when they get close.”

Pippi slipped down the hole and wiggled under the wire before Lana could complain she was too scared for lookout duty. “Max, where are you? Didn’t you hear what the human said? You have to get out of

here.”

He popped his head out of the insulation. Even with his cheeks puffed out with an acorn in his mouth, he still managed to grin. “Told you they wouldn’t find me.”

“Mama says we can’t talk with our mouth full.” She jumped onto the floor.

“Try and make me,” he taunted. “Besides, you can’t come in here anymore. No scaredy-rats allowed.”

How dare he make fun of her when she’d come to save him. She marched along one of the boards. “Fred is here. I saw him get out of his truck. He’ll trap you and take you away in a bag like Uncle Louie.”

“He’ll have to catch me first.”

Pippi stomped her paw. Max was in danger. Why couldn’t he get scared and run away like a normal squirrel? “You don’t have to stay out forever, just until we’re sure it’s safe.”

He flipped his tail, fluffing her face. “I’m sure it’s safe, scaredy-rat.”

“Fine, let them flop you. See if I care.” Of course, she cared. But she was so angry she almost convinced herself she didn’t. She jumped onto the ramp that went up to the ceiling.

“The humans are coming. The humans are coming.” Lana scurried down the hole and jumped to the floor. “Pippi, Max, hurry! You have to get out of here. I saw them—Daddy-Dean and big, bad Fred. They have a huge wooden thing with long branches and steps, and they’re using it to climb on the roof.”

“It’s called a ladder,” Max said.

“Whatever. You have to get out of here.”

“He won’t come.” Pippi’s eyes filled with tears. She couldn’t let her brother flop. If only Mama had come with her. He would listen to her. But she cared more about her new babies than helping her other kids.

“Did you see that? One went down this pipe,” Fred said from up above.

Lana’s eyes grew huge with fear. She stood frozen on the insulation.

Pippi was so scared she accidentally peed a tiny bit. She squeezed her back legs together to stop herself, but it was too late. She jumped off the rafter away from the wet spot.

Max looked from the dark stain on the board to her and laughed. “Scaredy-rat, scaredy-rat,” he sang. “Those dumb humans are nothing to be scared of. Watch this.”

He scampered onto the rafter, jumped over the pee spot, and crawled to the ceiling.

“What are you doing? They’ll catch you,” Pippi screamed.

Max wedged himself under the wire and wiggled into the pipe.

“A-ha! I got you now,” Fred shouted.

## Chapter 7

### FROZEN

Oh no! Max!

Lana sniffled. Pippi covered her mouth with her tail so the people wouldn't hear her cry. She looked up the pipe, but Max was gone. Fred had trapped him. Soon, he'd be flopping in a bag. She couldn't rescue him from that. No one could.

"Ha, ha. I ran right through his legs. The people are too slow to catch me." Max laughed.

Max! He was safe. He didn't flop. The humans didn't get him.

Pippi started shaking with relief. She'd rescued him. He'd never admit it, but she was the reason he had gotten out safely. She hadn't been a scaredy-rat. She'd been braver than she'd ever been. And she'd saved her brother's life.

She looked up the pipe at the coarse, scraggly hair on Fred's head. Max might be safe, but she and Lana weren't. They had to do what he'd done. "We have to get out of here fast."

Lana shook her head and curled her tail around her body.

Pippi couldn't repeat the disaster from when she'd tried to coax her into running from Daddy-Dean. This time she'd push Lana up the ramp to the ceiling.

She shoved her paws against her sister's back. Lana didn't budge.

"Come on," Pippi begged. "If Max can do it, we can too."

"That blasted squirrel went in and then came back out. You didn't see any others, did you, Dean?" Fred asked. His voice echoed in the pipe, sending shivers down Pippi's spine.

In the distance, Max laughed. "See, I told you they're stupid. They can't tell Lana and me apart."

"Nope," Daddy-Dean replied. "I only saw one when I checked the attic."

And he'd seen Pippi. The humans might not be able to tell them

apart. But their mistake could mean a bigger problem if Fred closed the hole. They had to get out fast. “Lana, run,” she whispered.

Lana stood frozen on her hind legs with her tail curled around her, staring up at the hole.

“I’ll help you get as many acorns as you want when we get out,” Pippi promised.

She didn’t move.

“See how the squirrel worked up the tin at the base of the vent and the wire around it,” Fred explained to Daddy-Dean. “We’ll cover the hole with some fiberglass that animals can’t bend or pull up.”

Pippi pushed Lana again. Her heart pounded as she tried to think of anything to make her sister move. They didn’t have much time. She could hear rustling sounds from the humans working around the pipe.

“I’ll give you all my acorns if you go right now. I’ll give you all the acorns in the world.”

Lana finally looked at her. “You don’t have any acorns of your own.”

“Because you promised to share with me. Max didn’t flop. We won’t either. Come on, before they close our only way to the acorns.” She didn’t know if they could run as fast as Max. But if the people closed the pipe and then came through the floor to trap them, they would flop for sure. They had to try.

“Fine, then. I’ll leave without you.” Pippi jumped onto the rafter and ran to the ceiling. But she stopped and looked down before she went up the hole.

Lana still didn’t move. If Pippi left her in the human building, she’d be too scared to look for another way out. After her sister had shared her nest and her food, Pippi couldn’t leave and let her end up trapped alone. She jumped into the insulation next to Lana.

The people made scraping noises above them, and Lana shuddered.

“How were you able to run down the pipe to warn Max and me if you’re too scared to move now?” Pippi wrapped her tail around her sister.

“They were on the ground. They’re not supposed to notice us on the roof.”

“The fiberglass is in,” Fred announced. “I’ve threaded the wire

around the outside. No squirrel will get in here again.” He laughed.

“What about the squirrels who are already in here?” Lana whispered, her eyes glistening with tears.

“It’s okay. We’ll wait until they go away and then we’ll find a safe way out.” With her sharp claws, Pippi could scratch through whatever Fred put in the hole. She hoped.

“I’m going to take a look at the other vents and make sure they’re secure,” Fred shouted, his voice more muffled than before. His footsteps crunched above the nest, moving to the other side of the roof.

Pippi jumped onto the rafter and ran up to the ceiling. The fiberglass stuff in the pipe looked cloudy, even though the sun was shining. She scratched at it, her claws gliding over it, instead of creating indents.

She dug her claws around the edges, scraping the flat boards of the ceiling. No matter how much she pushed and scraped, she couldn’t wedge the piece up to make even the smallest hole. On the other side of the cloudy pipe, she could see the wire Fred had placed. Max would be able to untwist it and yank it up. Maybe he could break through the fiberglass too.

The human steps moved directly overhead. Pippi stayed under the pipe, so scared she almost peed again, but she wanted Fred to look down and see her face. Then he’d take off the fiberglass to try to get her.

She wouldn’t run like Max had. She’d stay out of reach until he left the pipe. Then when he was far enough away for Lana to feel safe, they would sprint out.

Having a plan gave Pippi hope as she scraped her claws on the fiberglass.

“Everything is locked up tight,” Fred declared. His voice sounded close, but she couldn’t see him anymore. “You won’t have any more problems, Dean.”

The human footsteps moved away from the pipe and disappeared off the roof. Pippi scratched furiously on the cloudy fiberglass, but she didn’t make a single mark on it. She ran to the other vents in the ceiling and every crack where light came through. But just like before, each one was sealed tightly.

As she returned to the pipe, Max perched on top of it, tugging on the

new wire. She wanted to cry with relief. “Thank goodness. Can you help us get out?”

“Help you?” The new barrier muffled his voice. “You tricked me so you could steal my nest.”

Pippi was so surprised she almost fell off the ceiling. She dug her claws deeper into the rafter. “This is your fault. I came down here to save you, and look what happened to me.”

“Save me?” Max snorted. “You snuck in so you could steal my acorns and seeds and take the nest for yourself.”

If she could have gotten to him, she would have scratched and nipped him until he took his accusations back. She glanced down to see if Lana was angry too, but she was no longer standing frozen where Pippi had left her.

In a dark corner, she crouched over Max’s food pile, stuffing her face.



## **Chapter 8**

### **ITTY-BITTY**

Pippi jumped to the floor and ran to Lana. “What are you doing?”

“I eat when I’m nervous,” she said, her mouth so full of seeds Pippi could barely understand her. “So what? It’s Max’s fault we’re stuck in here. Why shouldn’t we eat his food?”

“Why can’t you run when you’re nervous?” Now she was as mad at Lana as she was at Max. “We could have gotten out of here if you’d run when I told you to.”

“I panicked. I freeze when I panic. I eat when I’m nervous. These seeds are good. Want one?”

Pippi shoved it in her mouth, amazed at the sweet and tangy flavor. No wonder Max liked to steal from the birdfeeder. The seeds were delicious. She helped herself to another one.

A bang sounded from outside. Lana dropped her seed and hugged her tail. “What was that?”

“Thunder. It’s going to rain,” Pippi said.

“Are you sure?” She stroked her tail with her paw. “What if Max is flopping in a bag, and Fred drives away with him.”

“He’s not.” Fred might be driving away, but she was sure Max hadn’t flopped. This time.

Lana let go of her tail and shoved another seed in her mouth. A couple minutes later raindrops pattered against the ceiling.

Pippi giggled.

“What?” Lana gulped down a huge mouthful of seeds.

“I thought getting trapped in here would be awful, but it’s not.” She twirled around. “We’re in the perfect nest. It’s dry and warm. We have tons of food. And best of all, Max is outside getting soaking wet.”

Lana giggled and twirled too. “Serves him right.”

They ate until they were so stuffed they couldn’t eat another bite. Then they made beds in the insulation and rested. When Pippi awoke,

she walked around the nest. She sniffed the vents in the roof and listened to the rain falling.

Had Max gone to Lana's nest, or had he found somewhere else to keep dry? Wherever he was, Pippi knew he wished he was with them.

Even though he'd been mean to her, she felt sorry for him. If he'd stayed here, he could have been warm and dry too.

When Lana woke up, they played tag. She wasn't as much fun as Max, but Pippi didn't tell her. After they were done, they ate more seeds and rested again.

For a few days everything was wonderful. The rain beat down on the roof, reminding them how lucky they were to be in a cozy home with plenty of food.

The rain finally slowed to a few drips. Then it stopped. The sun came out. Pippi could see the brightness through the cloudy fiberglass on the pipe. When she pressed her face to it, she could almost feel its warmth. But the rest of the attic stayed as dark as ever.

"I'm bored," Lana said. "I want to go outside and collect more acorns for my nest."

"You don't need your nest anymore. You have this one."

Lana looked at her like she was crazy. "I'm going back to mine when I get out of here. I need enough acorns to feed my babies for when I'm grown up."

"Babies! Why do you want to have dumb babies?" That was the worst idea Pippi had heard in her life. First Mama, now Lana.

Before she could answer, scratching came from the ceiling. Squirrel scratching! They ran up the ramp. In the pipe on the other side of the cloudy cover, Max tugged on the wire with both paws as hard as he could.

"Can you get it?" Pippi asked. She scraped the corner where the ceiling and fiberglass connected.

He grunted and bit the wire. Then he pulled it with his teeth.

Pippi pushed her head and paws against the fiberglass, trying to help. Her head hurt, but she kept pushing.

Some dust fell in her mouth. She brushed her paws over her mouth to get it out, but more yucky dirt and dust got in. Fred was right. Squirrels

couldn't bend or break this thing. The humans had blocked their only exit.

"You better not eat my food." Max panted. He wasn't trying to open the hole so he could help Pippi and Lana get free. No, he wanted to get inside for himself.

"Do you expect us to starve?" Lana shouted at him from where she sat halfway up the ramp.

"That's my stash for the winter." Max tugged the wire with his claws, but it didn't move.

"The winter? You don't have enough for two weeks, let alone all winter."

Pippi stopped scratching and looked at her sister. She couldn't be serious. Pippi dropped to the floor and ran to check the supply. The pile in the corner had dwindled to half the size it had been when Fred trapped them in the nest. She lifted the insulation to find the rest of Max's stash, but the floor was bare.

Lana was right. The food wouldn't last.

Pippi had wanted to get outside to enjoy the sunshine. But she thought they had everything they needed in the nest, so she hadn't worried about not being able to get out.

Now she panicked. She and Lana would starve if they didn't find a way out before the food disappeared. She ran back up the rafter. "Max, do you have more seeds hidden in here?"

"No, and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"This is serious." Pippi stomped her paw. "What happens when we don't have any more to eat and can't get out?"

"You should have thought of that before you tricked me."

"I didn't trick you. I'm stuck in here because I tried to save you." Tears filled her eyes. She pressed her front paws against them, trying not to cry.

When she lifted her paws, Max had moved away from the pipe, and she couldn't see him anymore.

"You have to help us," Lana pleaded, sounding close to tears too.

Max didn't answer.

Lana shuffled to the pile. She picked up a seed and started nibbling.

Pippi followed and yanked the seed out of her mouth.

“Hey,” she yelled.

Pippi threw the piece of seed on the floor and stood between her sister and their food. “Bite your claws if you’re nervous. From now on, we can only eat when we’re hungry.”

Lana picked up the seed again and stuck it in her mouth. “I’ll eat whenever I want. You’re not in charge of me. You can’t tell me what to do.”

Pippi puffed out her breath. She didn’t want to be a bossy mama, but she also didn’t want to starve. “We have to make the food last until we can figure out how to get out or get more seeds in.”

Lana reached around her, picked up an acorn, and started nibbling. “How are we going to do that? There’s no way to get in or out.”

“So listen to me, and stop eating!” Pippi tried to take the acorn from her, but Lana scurried away.

Pippi didn’t want to fight her for every bite. Plus, she was too upset to be hungry. “Let’s split the pile in half, so we both get the same amount. Then you can eat as much as you want from yours and I won’t say a thing.”

Lana turned toward her, her cheeks stuffed with the acorn. “Okay, but this one doesn’t count.”

They spent the rest of the day counting seeds and nuts and acorns. Pippi carried her pile across the nest, one piece at a time. Then she retraced her steps to make sure she didn’t drop anything along the way.

Afterwards, she was exhausted, but at least they each had the same amount to eat. They even split the last seed in half. She lifted the insulation and stared at her itty-bitty pile.

Her stomach growled. She bet she could eat the whole stack right now. She forced herself to only eat the tiny half of a seed that she and Lana had split.

Tomorrow she would look for a way out, and she would do it without Max’s help.

## Chapter 9

### SO CLOSE SHE COULD SMELL IT

Pippi clawed at every part of the nest where light came in. She bit at every edge and corner until her teeth hurt. But she couldn't even make a teeny, tiny hole.

However, she did make dust—lots of it. It got in her mouth and nose and made her cough. In fact, coughing kept her awake half the night.

When she finally stopped coughing, a splinter in her paw started hurting and kept her awake for the rest of the night. When the sun came up, she limped up the ramp to the pipe. She held her paw to the light coming through the cloudy cover and pulled out the splinter with her teeth.

Lana didn't help her look for a way out of the nest or check on Pippi's injuries. She curled her body around her acorns and nibbled nonstop.

By the third day, Pippi had only two scoops of seeds and three acorns left. She stopped clawing at the ceiling and pushed her head and paws against the walls.

"Can't you do whatever you're doing quietly?" Lana grumbled.

"I'm trying to find a rotten spot in the wall that I can push or bite through."

"The humans will hear us again."

Pippi knew better than to tease the people. But she couldn't stop searching for a way out. She climbed the rafter and clung to the ceiling, making her way to the tallest side of the nest.

With her head, she pushed against the top of the wall. Squishier than the boards but not as soft as the insulation, the wall shook a little. Nothing else she'd pushed on had wiggled.

Excited, she scratched the wall. Dust flaked against her paws.

"Stop it. You're getting me dirty," Lana complained.

Pippi ignored her and scraped harder. If she made a hole, it would be

worth a night full of coughing.

Lana huffed and moved away from her dusty bed.

Pippi looked down at the bare insulation where she'd been lying.

"Where's all your food?"

She bit her claws and wouldn't look up.

Excitement evaporating, Pippi's heart fluttered with fear. Lana couldn't have eaten everything already. Even if Pippi made a hole, it might not help them escape. "You don't have to tell me where it is. But you hid it, right? You didn't eat it all?"

"You're not Mama. You can't tell me how much to eat."

Lana had eaten all her food. But she wouldn't stop getting hungry just because it was gone. She'd want to eat Pippi's seeds, even though Pippi ignored her hunger and ate bite-sized portions a couple times a day to make her supply last longer.

She looked down at her piggy sister again. Lana wasn't just piggy. She'd gotten fat from eating so much.

Pippi scratched harder. The harder she scratched, the hungrier she got. The hungrier she got, the madder she became. She scratched harder and harder. Finally her arms and paws ached so much she couldn't scratch anymore. She stood on the rafter and stared at the wall. She'd made a tiny hole all the way through.

She poked her claw in and tugged on the edges of the wall, making the hole big enough to stare into. She couldn't see anything but darkness.

She looked down again to make sure Lana wasn't eating her food.

She wasn't. Curled in another corner with her tail wrapped around herself, her body shook as she cried silently.

Pippi didn't want to feel sorry for her. It was her own fault. Now more than ever, they had to find a way out. She couldn't watch Lana starve. And Pippi's pile belonged to her. She didn't have to share.

She scratched at the hole all day and night. By morning she'd made it big enough to stick her head through.

"What's in there?" Lana asked. She uncurled her body and crawled up the rafter.

"I don't know." She wished she'd made the hole a little bigger. She

had to wiggle and squirm to pull her body through. Once inside, she crawled slowly down the wall into the darkness. After a couple steps, her paws touched a metal floor. There were tiny holes in the bottom, so small she couldn't stick a claw in them.

Standing on the pointy top of a ledge that sloped down on both sides, Pippi sniffed for clues and danger, then crept down one of the ramps. Keeping her nose close to the floor, she smelled grass and leaves and even a hint of acorn. She was so close to the outside.

"What do you see?" Lana called.

"Nothing. It's dark, but I think I'm in a tunnel. It smells like it leads outside."

"Be careful." Lana didn't follow, but Pippi could hear the excitement in her voice.

After a few steps, the tunnel became flat. She sniffed the tiny holes and scratched the corners for an opening. Pushing her weight against the walls, she attempted to break through.

If only another squirrel could tear at the walls from the outside or at least tell her what kind of tunnel she was in and where it went. "Max," she called.

No answer. Pippi scratched again. Something tapped directly under her. She jumped back and froze. Had a human knocked on the tunnel?

Her heart pounded, filling her eardrums with the thudding sound. The wind could have knocked a branch against the metal floor. She didn't dare tap or scratch in return. She'd learned her lesson about teasing the humans.

Lifting her claws off the metal so they didn't click, she shifted onto the backs of her paws and got ready to sneak away.

A door slammed, and Pippi froze again.

"Dean, why are you standing on the picnic table?" Mother-Honey asked, her voice clear and very close.

"I was relaxing on the deck with my coffee when I heard something in the soffit," he said. He banged on the place where Pippi had been standing before.

Oh no. The soffit. She'd found the tunnel where they'd trapped Uncle Louie and made him flop.

“That’s impossible,” Mother-Honey said. “Fred sealed off the soffit when he trapped that other squirrel, and he checked it again when he sealed the roof. Nothing can get in.”

If Fred had sealed Uncle Louie’s hole with the same fiberglass he used on the roof, Pippi wouldn’t be able to get out either.

Ugh. She’d been so sure she was close to getting free. She could smell how close, but she still needed a hole to the outside.

“I’m telling you I heard something,” Daddy-Dean said. A couple weeks ago, he didn’t believe Mother-Honey when she’d heard the creatures in the attic. Now she didn’t believe him. If Pippi didn’t want to get out so badly, she might have laughed.

“Fred took care of it,” Mother-Honey said. “You watched him seal the roof. If you want to worry about a squirrel, get the one that keeps stealing the food from the birdfeeder.”

The birdfeeder. Yes. The birdfeeder was near the deck. If Daddy-Dean could tap on the tunnel while he stood on the deck, that meant her tunnel was only a few feet from the birdfeeder where Max gathered seeds. If he heard her shouting, he could get help from the other squirrels. As soon as the humans left the deck, she and Lana could get free.

“I’ll do that,” Daddy-Dean said. “I’m going to sit out here with my coffee and figure out the best way to trap that squirrel.”



## **Chapter 10**

### **SORT OF ON ACCIDENT**

The door slammed, bringing silence. Mother-Honey had left but not Daddy-Dean. Pippi didn't dare call for Max and put both squirrels in danger.

She wandered along the metal tunnel, stopping at every sound, imagining humans ready to grab her. Finally, she came to a ramp and crawled up to the top point. Everything seemed the same as the place where she'd started into the tunnel, but this ramp didn't have a hole leading into the nest.

Down the other side, the tunnel became flat again. She didn't spend as much time exploring. With no openings to the outside and unmovable walls, the soffit had no place for her to get out.

When she reached another ramp, she heard Lana crying. This one had a hole at the top—the same hole she'd clawed out of the nest. She'd circled the outside of the building and returned to where she started.

Wiggling through the hole proved just as tight as from the other direction, but she managed to pull her body back into the nest. "Lana, what's wrong?"

"Pippi, is that you?" She lifted her head from the insulation she was lying in and wiped her eyes with her tail. "Pippi!"

Lana ran up the rafter and threw herself at Pippi, hugging her so tightly Pippi lost her balance and fell. Her head hit the wall by the hole. A chunk of dusty wall fell into the tunnel, making the hole twice the size it had been before. She gripped the edge with her claws, so she didn't fall to the ground.

After she steadied herself, she rubbed a paw over her sore head. No one had ever been this happy to see her. She would have enjoyed it if Lana hadn't given her a human-size headache.

"Why were you crying?" Pippi asked.

Lana swiped her eyes with her tail again. "You were gone so long I

didn't think you were coming back. I thought you found a way out and left me or the people got you."

"Nobody got me. I found Uncle Louie's tunnel, and I'd hoped it would lead to a way outside, but it just circles back to this hole. If you hadn't been too scared to come with me, you could have seen for yourself."

Pippi wiggled around her sister and down the rafter to the floor. She'd been so excited about the hole that she'd skipped her morning seed ration, and she was starving.

Lana raced in front of her, blocking her path, her black eyes wide and bright. "I did try to follow you. But I couldn't fit through the hole. If you had found a way out, I still would have been stuck here and would have starved to death."

Lana was chubby enough she wouldn't starve any time soon. But once Pippi's food ran out, she didn't have layers of winter fat to keep her alive. She didn't want to eat in front of her sister, but she also didn't want to share with someone who didn't need the nourishment. She needed it for herself.

"The hole's bigger now. How about we go through the tunnel together so you can see what it's like?" Pippi suggested.

"Great idea." Lana sounded more excited than usual. She even put her paws on Pippi's shoulders and turned her up the rafter toward the tunnel.

Pippi tried to shrug her off. She wanted to sneak back for a bite of seed or an acorn, so she had energy to walk around. "You go ahead. I'll follow you."

"No!" Lana said in alarm. "It's dark in there. I need you to go first."

Glancing at the corner where her seeds were hidden underneath the insulation, Pippi sighed. If she didn't eat one now, they would last longer. And she didn't want her sister to cry again.

Lana hung on to Pippi's tail while they walked through the tunnel. They crawled slowly, first because Pippi worried about Daddy-Dean. Also, Lana had trouble walking and holding Pippi's tail at the same time, and Pippi didn't like having her tail pulled.

By the time they made it around the circle, Lana had become brave

enough to let go. Pippi started to wiggle through the hole.

“Let’s go around again,” Lana said.

Soon they ran faster and faster, racing each other around and around the loop. Pippi forgot about human dangers and finding a way out as she raced for fun.

“I win!” She jumped through the hole, ran down the rafter, and dropped into the insulation, exhausted but happy.

“Wait,” Lana called. She stopped giggling and sounded like her worried self again. “Where are you going?”

“I’m starving.” She dashed to her food.

“Wait. I have to tell you something.”

“What is it?” Pippi lifted the foam padding. She was so hungry she planned to eat a whole acorn, even if Lana drooled and begged for a bite.

Nothing was under the insulation but bare floor. Pippi stared at the spot, sure she’d hidden her food there. She didn’t forget where she buried things. Mama had trained her better than that.

She sniffed the ground and scratched through the layers of insulation. Her scent was still there. “I know I put my seeds in this corner.”

“Uh, Pippi,” Lana said from behind her. “Remember when I said I didn’t think you were coming back?”

She glanced at her sister but was too hungry for a serious discussion. “We can talk after I eat. Right now, I need to find my seeds.”

“That’s the problem,” she whispered, biting her claws. “You’re not going to find them.”

“What?” She stopped searching and stared at her. “What did you do with them?”

“Stop yelling at me.” Her voice trembled.

“Lana!” Pippi yelled louder, jumping at her sister and slapping her paws on other squirrel’s shoulders. “Where are my seeds?”

“I didn’t think you were coming back. If you didn’t return, you didn’t need them.”

“I came back, so tell me where you put them.”

Lana paused and took a deep, shuddering breath. “I sort of ate them.”

“Sort of ate them?” She dug her claws into Lana’s shoulders. She couldn’t believe her own sister would do something so awful. They’d

made a deal when they split the food. She never thought her sister would go back on her word. Max, yes, but not Lana.

“On accident,” she whimpered.

“On accident?” Pippi dropped her paws and stepped away, too angry to touch her without hurting her. Eating her food hadn’t been an accident. No wonder Lana had become too fat to fit through the hole.

“You know how I eat when I’m nervous,” she explained in a tiny whisper. “I was a little hungry too, and I didn’t have anything left, and —”

Pippi crawled to the corner where she’d hidden her seeds and lifted the insulation again. Completely gone. She couldn’t believe Lana had eaten everything, even Pippi’s three special acorns.

Her stomach growled. Her throat ached.

Lana crawled up behind her. “I’m sorry.”

Pippi turned around and bared her teeth. “You’re not forgiven. Go away.”

“But—”

“Go away. Leave me alone.”

Lana looked close to tears, but Pippi was already crying. She couldn’t take care of her sister. Her stomach was too hungry for her to take care of herself.

## Chapter 11

### PARTY POOPER

Pippi crawled under the insulation and pulled it over herself like a blanket. Staring at the squishy stuff between her and the ceiling, she noticed a piece of seed wedged between the soft fibers. She grabbed it, devouring it in a single gulp. Instead of feeling better, her stomach hurt more.

She licked the dust from the floor where her food used to be, hoping it would taste like seeds. But it tasted like yucky insulation.

Finally, she fell asleep. When she woke up in the pitch darkness of nighttime, her stomach hurt too much for her to go back to sleep. She crept over the boards and rafters, sniffing and digging for any scrap Lana might have missed.

“Are you still mad at me?” Her sister’s voice came through the darkness from her corner. She hadn’t been able to sleep either.

“Yes,” Pippi said, but she didn’t have the energy to feel as mad as before.

She sniffled. “What are we going to do now?”

“There’s no food left, so you can’t eat.” Pippi was being mean, but she didn’t care. Lana had a fat, round, full tummy from eating Pippi’s meal while she’d been trying to find a way to get both of them out.

Lana whimpered. “Are we going to die?”

“No, we’re not going to die.” She tried to sound sure, but she wasn’t. If they starved to death, she would die first. She didn’t want to die. She’d rather flop than starve to death.

She crawled to Lana and wrapped her tail around her sister. They curled together in the insulation and cuddled without talking.

They must have fallen asleep because Pippi’s growling stomach woke her up. Light shone through the sealed pipe. She had to find a way out to get food. Shifting her tail off Lana, she tried to scoot away without waking her.

Lana opened her eyes. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going in the tunnel. One spot is close to the birdfeeder. If any squirrels are around, they might hear us and be able to help."

"Like Max or Mama," she said.

Pippi looked at the hopeful smile on her sister's face and couldn't feel angry anymore. "Do you want to come with me?"

Lana nodded. They crawled through the hole and into the tunnel to the spot where Daddy-Dean had noticed Pippi. They took turns yelling for Max and Mama and their cousins.

Nobody answered.

"Anybody?" Lana whispered after Pippi's throat was too sore to yell.

They huddled in the dark tunnel. Nobody missed them. Nobody noticed they were in trouble. If their family and friends didn't hear them and they couldn't find a way out on their own, who would rescue them?

The door to the human building slammed, and Daddy-Dean's voice boomed below the metal floor. "Scat, shoo."

Pippi and Lana looked at each other. They'd been sitting silently for a while. Why had Daddy-Dean started yelling after they were quiet?

Unless he wasn't yelling at them.

"I'll eat all the seeds I want. I'm not scared of you," Max shouted.

Max was out there!

"Max," Pippi yelled, ignoring her sore throat.

Lana nudged her with a paw. "Shh," she whispered. "Daddy-Dean will hear you and notice us."

"As long as you keep putting seeds out, I'm going to keep eating them," Max chattered.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear that squirrel was talking to me," Daddy-Dean muttered, his voice right under the tunnel.

Ugh. Why did her brother yell at the human who couldn't understand him instead of answering her? "Max, we're out of food," Pippi shouted as loud as she could. "You have to help us find a way out or get seeds in to us."

"Aha," Daddy-Dean said. "He's not talking to me. Something is in here." He tapped on the metal floor under Pippi's paws.

Lana froze then scurried backwards. But Pippi couldn't give up what

could be her only chance to get help. Daddy-Dean would only make her flop. She'd already discovered what would be worse than flopping.

"I'm not falling for your tricks this time, Pippi," Max said. "You got me out of the nest so you could eat my food. You can't trick me into giving you the birdfeeder supply too."

"I never tricked you." She couldn't believe he was still mad about that when he was safe and had as much to eat as he wanted. She hadn't had a seed ration in two days, and she'd stopped being mad at Lana for eating her food.

"Get away from here. Scat, shoo," Daddy-Dean yelled.

"Too bad, so sad, Pippi." Max's voice faded, like he was scampering away.

"I'd like to punch that boy in the nose," Lana muttered, stepping close to Pippi.

He wouldn't help them, and Mama was too busy with her babies.

Pippi kicked at the side of the tunnel. The sound echoed off the metal walls.

Daddy-Dean tapped the bottom, vibrating the floor under her back paws.

She started to stomp again, but Lana wrapped her paws around Pippi's legs and hung on tightly. "Don't make a sound," she whispered. "They'll trap us or grab us with their hands. We could flop."

She shivered at the thought of a human touching her. Then her stomach growled again. If they flopped, what would happen? Fred had supposedly taken Uncle Louie to the country, but no one ever saw him again, so she didn't know for sure.

The country probably had food, but if it didn't, she didn't have any here either. At a new place, she might be able to escape and find something to eat. She'd tried every possible pipe and hole and found no escape from this nest.

She couldn't get outside. If she ever wanted to taste a seed again, she had to try something crazy.

Trying to think of what, she followed Lana through the tunnel and into the nest. Dropping onto the insulation, the idea came to her. "We have to get the humans to help us."

Lana gasped. “No. They’re our enemies.”

“They’re our only hope. Even if Max wanted to help, he can’t open our entrance. If he could, he would have come in and kicked us out so he could have this place to himself. The people sealed it too tight for any squirrel to get in. They have to open it.”

“No.” Lana shivered. “We’ll end up like Uncle Louie.”

“If they trap us and flop us, we’ll get out of here. Isn’t that better than starving?”

She chewed on her claws, then shook her head. “No, I’d rather starve than flop.”

Easy for her to say. With her round, full stomach, she could probably live a long, healthy life off her fat. Pippi wanted to see the sunshine again. She wanted to run in the grass and jump from branch to branch in the trees. Even if it rained, she wanted to be free.

The girls huddled together as daylight faded to darkness and back to light again. Pippi’s stomach stopped growling and just hurt. After a while, it stopped hurting, and she felt weak. She didn’t have the energy to walk around, let alone claw her way through a hole. She needed the humans to make the hole.

“That’s it,” Pippi shouted, amazed she’d never thought of it before.

Lana opened her bleary eyes and hugged herself. “My tummy hurts.”

She had the growling stomach and hunger pains Pippi had already gone through. She wouldn’t live a long life off her fat. She would only last a couple days longer than Pippi before she died too. They had to get out before it was too late.

“There is another hole. Remember when Daddy-Dean came up out of the floor? You know, the day he saw me?” Pippi looked around and found the square outline in the floor a couple feet away from where she and Lana were lying.

“You’ll never be able to lift the floor with your claws,” Lana said in her party pooper voice.

“I won’t have to. Daddy-Dean will do it.” Finally, Pippi had hope, and hope gave her energy. Maybe they could escape without flopping.

Lana didn’t argue as she closed her eyes. She didn’t share Pippi’s hope.



## **Chapter 12**

### **THE ACORN**

Pippi stayed awake, listening for the human voices. When she finally heard them, she banged on the metal tube of the stove vent that the squirrels had once used as home base for playing tag.

“What was that?” Mother-Honey shouted.

Yes, she’d gotten their attention. Pippi scratched her claws on the tube, even though the scraping gave her shivers.

“I told you something was still up there,” Daddy-Dean said. “I’ll look into it next week when I return from my business trip.”

Next week? Lana might not starve by then, but if Pippi was still alive, she’d be too weak to flop when they put her in a sack. She banged on the tube again. He had to get her out before he left.

“Daddy, your taxi’s here,” Natalie called.

Pippi banged furiously, but the humans shouted “goodbye” and “I love you” instead of talking about her. Soon only Natalie’s and Mother-Honey’s voices were left.

Daddy-Dean didn’t have to lift the floor. Mother-Honey could do it. Even the smallest people were bigger than squirrels. Maybe Natalie would try.

Pippi scratched on the tube again.

“I can’t stand a week of that noise. I’m calling Fred,” Mother-Honey announced.

Pippi shuddered. Mother-Honey and Natalie didn’t scare her, at least not too much. But Fred was the scariest human she’d ever seen.

After a few minutes of shuffling and soft murmurs, Natalie asked, “What did he say, Mother?”

“He’ll be here first thing tomorrow morning. He thinks something might have gotten sealed in the attic and can’t get out. He’s bringing his trap and some poison.”

Pippi trembled. She’d once met some mice who explained about the

special food that tasted good but killed any animal that ate it. Poison did not fit into her plan.

The mice had said squirrels were lucky because humans didn't try to poison them. Right now, she didn't feel lucky. She and Lana had to escape before Fred got them.

"Mother, you can't let him kill it," Natalie said. "The poor little animal is already probably scared to death."

*Yes, listen to Natalie.*

"I don't care what he does to it. I want it out of my attic," Mother-Honey said.

Fred planned to poison them, and Mother-Honey would let him. Natalie didn't like it, but she couldn't stop them.

Pippi wandered back to Lana who'd been sleeping and hadn't heard what the humans decided. She wouldn't like Pippi's plan either, but this time Pippi wouldn't give her a choice. She needed to conserve energy and sleep like Lana. But she couldn't relax enough to settle down.

She would go inside the trap, and she would bring her sister with her, even if Lana froze and panicked. Hopefully, Fred would make them flop and take them away to join Uncle Louie in a place with lots of food.

Hours later, she heard Fred's rumbling truck through the walls of the nest. She shivered and hugged her tail. Maybe she needed to worry about herself panicking, instead of Lana.

Lana opened her eyes. "I've been thinking. If the humans give us poison, let's eat it right away."

Pippi stared at her. Lana had heard that Fred was coming. She hadn't been sleeping, after all.

"We'll have yummy food in our tummy."

"That's a horrible idea. We'll die."

"Do you have a better idea?" Lana asked.

"Yes, but you can't freeze this time." A loud scraping noise stopped her from telling Lana the rest of her plan to get trapped and flop their way to a safe place.

"Hi Fred," Natalie said down below. "Mother says you came to catch the squirrel again."

"I sure did. I got this nice trap with a big acorn inside to lure the

varmints in.”

“An acorn,” Lana moaned, clutching her stomach. “I love acorns.”

“That acorn has gooey stuff all around it,” Natalie said.

“Just a little poison to make my life easier.” Fred chuckled.

Oh no, he couldn’t put the poison inside the trap. Lana would never be able to resist until they got to safety.

“But you’ll kill the animal that eats it.” Natalie sounded almost as horrified as Pippi felt. *Almost*.

“Gotta get rid of it, or it’ll keep coming back. It’s probably the same one I caught and set free before.”

He was wrong. Uncle Louie had never returned. Once Pippi got out, she’d never come back to this building either.

“We’re going to die,” Lana moaned. “At least my stomach will be full, and the last thing I eat will be my favorite food.”

Pippi grabbed her by the cheeks and shook her furry face. “You’re not going to eat the acorn. We are not going to die. We’re going to get out of here.”

The sad black eyes staring back at her told Pippi that Lana didn’t believe her. But before either of them could say another word, the floor creaked. Lana dove under the insulation. Pippi followed her, pushing her claws through the fibers to make peepholes.

The floor lifted and the mysterious hole appeared once again. Freedom. Drool puddled in her dry mouth. The floor board kept rising and moving toward them, then lowered.

Pippi scrunched back, but the piece of floor landed on the insulation on top of her making everything completely dark. Worse, the lid crushed her so she could hardly breathe.

She reached her paw forward but couldn’t feel Lana. She had to get free. She couldn’t let this heavy lid ruin her chance.

“Hand me the trap,” Fred said, his voice muffled from all the layers covering her.

“Acorn,” Lana whispered.

Pippi had to reach her before she ate the poison. She stretched forward as far as she could. With the heavy thing weighing down on her, she could only reach the fluff of Lana’s tail.

“I’ll leave the trap right by the edge. It’ll be nice and easy to take out after the animal’s dead. Dean can pull it down when he gets back from his trip, and it won’t even trigger his asthma,” Fred said, his voice moving down below.

They had to get out. Once the hole closed, she and Lana would die before it opened again, whether they went inside the trap or not, whether they ate the poison or not.

The lid still pressing her on back, Pippi lunged for Lana. Suddenly, the piece of floor lifted off her. She slammed into Lana so hard her sister skidded out from under the insulation, straight through the hole in the ceiling, just as Fred dropped the lid into place.

Lana shrieked.

“AHHH!” Fred screamed. “There’s a squirrel on my head!”

## **Chapter 13**

### A NEW FRIEND

“Jump Lana,” Pippi shouted. “Jump to the floor. Run for cover.”

Crawling out from under the insulation, Pippi could hear Lana and the humans screaming, but she couldn’t see them. She couldn’t see anything.

The lid that had been squishing her now covered the hole in the floor but not as tightly as usual. A crack of light shone through one corner. If she could make the crack bigger, she could wiggle through.

“No, don’t touch it with your bare hands,” Fred hollered, probably at one of the other humans. “Squirrels carry diseases.”

“We do not,” Pippi muttered. She and Lana were perfectly healthy. Or at least they had been until they ran out of food.

If he was ordering people not to touch Lana, she probably wasn’t on his head anymore. But she also must have frozen, making it easy for the humans to catch her and put her in a trap with a poisoned acorn that she’d gobble up.

Pippi wedged one paw under the corner of the lid and tried to lift, but it didn’t budge. She tried and tried, using all her muscles, but the lid wouldn’t move an inch.

“Watch the squirrel,” Fred ordered. “I’m going out to the truck for my heavy gloves and some more poison.”

Her stomach clenched. She had to get down there to protect Lana.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Mother-Honey said. “You’re not leaving us alone with a squirrel loose in the house. Natalie and I will get your gloves. You watch the animal.”

Pippi had to get to her before they returned with the poison. If Lana ate it, it would be all Pippi’s fault for pushing her into the house. She lay on her stomach and braced her paws against the floor under the insulation. Then she pushed her front paws against the lid.

Her rear paws skidded backwards, hitting one of the sturdy boards

that ran across the floor of the attic. She pushed as hard as she could against it, stretching her body out.

The lid moved a tiny bit and then a tiny bit more. Although the hole was smaller than she was used to crawling through, she couldn't stretch any further to make it bigger.

She stuck her head in the hole then wiggled her shoulders to get her front paws through. Thanks to not having any food, she'd become really skinny and could fit through tiny spaces.

The human's ladder was right below her. She scrunched her back legs against the edge of the hole and jumped on top of the ladder.

Lana huddled frozen in the middle of the floor. Fred held a white plastic bucket upside-down in his hands as he crept toward her.

"Lana, run," Pippi screamed from the top of the ladder. "Go, go."

Fred swung toward her. "It's another squirrel!"

Even though Pippi had distracted him and given Lana a chance to escape, she didn't take it. Except for her quivering fur, she stayed completely still.

"Run," Pippi yelled again.

Mother-Honey opened a door and stepped inside. "There's another one?"

The wonderful breeze of outside air ruffled Pippi's fur. The smell of grass and pine filled her nose and her lungs. She had to get to it.

The door Mother-Honey had come through was the hole to the outside. As soon as it opened again, she had a clear shot to freedom. After she and Lana went through the door, they'd be safe. They were going to make it.

Fred slammed the bucket down on top of Lana. He pressed his hands on the top of it. "Natalie, come hold this down."

Through the plastic, Lana started to cry.

Natalie walked across the floor and put her hands on the bucket where Fred's had been.

Pippi wanted to cry too. They could have gotten free, but she'd taken her eyes off Fred and didn't notice him going after Lana until it was too late. Even if the hole to the outside opened again, she couldn't run out without Lana.

Fred covered his hands with the gloves Mother-Honey had brought him. "Where's the poison?"

"I didn't get it," Mother-Honey said. "Natalie begged me not to. And really Fred, I can't stand the thought of poison and dead animals inside my beautiful house."

"This squirrel is so scared. Can we let it free outside, please?" Natalie begged. She looked like she might cry if the others said no.

Pippi felt a flash of hope. Natalie was on her side!

But Fred was not. He lunged toward her. She dashed down the ladder so fast she ran into Natalie's legs before she could make herself change directions.

Natalie screamed and jumped. Pippi dodged the little human's feet before Natalie stepped on her tail.

She had to run, but where? With the door going outside still closed, she didn't know which way was safe. She whipped to the left and then to the right, trying to decide, and accidentally brushed against Natalie's leg again.

Natalie screeched and kicked, knocking the bucket over. Lana huddled in a ball with her tail curled around herself and her paws over her eyes, but she was free.

"Lana, come on." Pippi ran to her and pushed against her.

Natalie screamed so loud Pippi's ears hurt. She might have been a friend before, but Pippi had ruined it by running into her and scaring her. The two squirrels were on their own again.

Pippi grabbed Lana's tail and pulled as hard as she could, trying to get her sister angry enough to run after her to fight with her. "You can't lie still. Fred will get you again."

Sure enough, he headed straight for them with the bucket in his hands. Pippi left Lana's side and ran toward him, dashing between his legs. She hadn't thought of a plan yet, but if she made him chase her, he wouldn't have a chance to catch Lana.

"Hey, you." He started to go after Pippi like she wanted him to. But then he stopped and turned back. "Let's get the one that's not moving. Then we'll worry about the crazy bugger."

No, no, no! Pippi ran to Fred as he held the bucket over her sister.

She had to make him notice her before he covered Lana again. She dug her claws into the cloth covering his leg. Human clothes were thinner than fur, and without trying to scratch, she caught his skin.

Fred screamed and ran in circles. Pippi ran higher up his leg, clinging harder, trying to keep from falling off.

Hanging onto the wild man was worse than flopping, worse than poison. Any moment she would fling against the wall or get squashed on the floor under his humungous body.

“Outside, Fred,” Mother-Honey shrieked, pulling the door open. “Run outside with that thing.”

It took Pippi two dizzying spins before she realized she was the thing. Yes. Outside. Take her outside. As long as Lana came too.

“Come on, Lana,” she yelled. “Run outside! Go. All you have to do is move, and you’ll be free.” She tried to see if her sister followed her instructions, but she couldn’t get a good view of anything with Fred jumping and spinning so fast.

His hand closed around the scruff at the back of her neck. Pippi turned her head and snapped her teeth, biting his glove. He jerked his hand away. Pippi scurried up his chest and over his shoulder to his back.

“Oh, you poor little thing, you must be so scared,” Natalie said.

“More terrified than I’ve ever been in my life.” Pippi gasped. Finally, someone realized she wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. She just wanted to get free and return to her own life far, far away from the horrible, scary nest in human territory.

“Natalie, don’t touch that thing,” Mother-Honey yelled.

Fred turned round and round. He reached across his back in every direction. Darting from side to side to avoid his hand, Pippi glimpsed Natalie.

She cupped Lana in her bare hands. She hadn’t been talking to Pippi, after all. She’d been talking to her sister. In fact, she still was.

Mother-Honey held open the door while Natalie slowly carried Lana toward the exit. If Lana was getting free, Pippi could make a run for it too. She jumped to the floor, so dizzy she nearly fell over.

Fred stomped his heavy boot down. She darted to the side at the last second before it landed on top of her. Then she raced between Natalie’s



legs and out of the house. She ran down the rock hard steps and into the grass.

Oh yes, yes, yes! She'd made it outside to freedom.

But Lana wasn't with her. Pippi stopped and looked back. The human was still holding her sister.

## Chapter 14

### SEVEN

“Jump,” Pippi yelled as Natalie stood at the top of the steps outside the building, holding her curled-up, quivering sister. “You’re free, Lana. Jump.”

She didn’t move. Pippi couldn’t tell if she’d even opened her eyes to know she was outside.

“Give the blasted creature to me,” Fred demanded, coming out the door.

“Lana, jump, please. Get away, and you’ll be safe,” Pippi begged. She had to think of something to wake her sister out of her panicked, frozen state.

Natalie walked down the steps and lowered her hands, setting Lana on the edge of the grass, instead of giving her to Fred. Sweet, wonderful Natalie was the best human in the world.

“I’m getting that poison, and I’m going put it on every acorn on this property,” Fred announced. He marched down the steps, his big feet coming inches from stepping on Lana, but Natalie stood guard.

Not even Natalie would be able to save Lana from the tasty acorns though.

“Thank you for your help, Fred,” Mother-Honey said. “But now that the squirrels are out of our house, you don’t need to do anything more.”

*That’s right*, Pippi thought.

“I will not let these animals make a fool out of me. We are a higher species.”

Humans were bigger, but from what Pippi had seen, they were far less evolved. They didn’t even have fur to protect their skin.

“I’m sure we can handle any future squirrel trouble on our own,” Mother-Honey said. “Natalie seems to have a special way with the creatures.”

“You won’t have any more trouble from me,” Pippi said. Everything

Mama had warned her about going into human territory was true. In fact, it had been worse than her warnings.

She sniffed something under her paws and suddenly knew how to unfreeze Lana. Pippi dug in the dirt then lifted an acorn out of the ground. “Lana, look. Acorn.”

Finally, Lana opened her eyes. Pippi held the acorn up then shoved it in her mouth. Lana squealed and dashed toward her.

With the acorn between her teeth, Pippi ran across the yard and over the fence. She could feel Lana’s breath on her back paws as she darted through more grass and up a tree. She didn’t stop until she was inside her sister’s nest.

Pippi spit the acorn into her paws and held it out as Lana joined her.

She took the acorn, rubbing it around in her paws until it shone. She lifted it to her mouth but then lowered it and pushed it toward Pippi instead. “You need this more than I do.”

Pippi took a bite, letting the delicious nutty sweetness settle against the inside of her cheeks. Then she pushed it back to Lana. “We both need it.”

They shared the acorn in silence. Pippi was so happy to have food in her stomach again.

Lana yawned. “I’m going to take a nap. Do you want to cuddle with me?”

Pippi stood on her hind legs and stretched. “No, I’m going to look for more food. Maybe I’ll run into Max.” Or Natalie. She really wanted to tell the girl ‘thank you’ for saving her sister.

“Thanks for helping me get out of the human house,” Lana said. “You can share my nest and my acorns anytime.”

“Thanks.” She might sleep in Lana’s nest when the weather turned cold or they were lonely. But Lana had worked hard to build up her food supply. Pippi couldn’t take it from her. She needed to find her own. She knew how it felt to starve, and she would be prepared so she never did again.

She wandered down the tree and around the yard, breathing in the fresh air, sniffing all the smells she’d missed—nuts, pine, moss, even a faint whiff of skunk.

She nibbled at the tree bark and grass. Everything smelled and tasted so good. After days in the dark nest, the world outside seemed unbelievably bright.

She scampered in a wide circle around the deck at the back of the house until she arrived at the birdfeeder where Max hung upside down stuffing his cheeks. "Hi Max."

His back legs kicked free, and he fell to the ground on his head.

"Are you okay?" She dashed toward him.

"Yeah." He rubbed the top of his head. "How did you... I thought you..." He seemed too surprised and confused to complete his thought.

"We escaped through the inside of the human building."

His eyes widened. "Is it full of seeds and acorns?"

"I didn't see any, but I didn't really look." As hungry as Pippi had been, she'd been too worried about poison to think of eating anything. "If you see the scary guy Fred, you need to hide. Don't eat anything he puts out. I think the other humans made him leave, but he threatened to poison us all."

"Oh yeah?" Of course, Max didn't look scared. "What did you do to make him so mad? Jump on his head?"

"Lana did."

"Lana?" Max laughed. "Man, I missed all the good stuff when I ran out of the nest."

"I'm sorry we ate your food," Pippi said.

"No, I'm sorry." He sounded like he meant it. "Mama was so mad when she found out you and Lana were stuck in there and I didn't call the squirrels together for a rescue mission."

"Mama's mad?"

"Not at you. At me. She's been so worried about you."

"Me?" Pippi couldn't believe it. "I thought she was too busy with her babies to care about me."

"The babies aren't my only kids, you know." Mama's voice came from behind her. "I worry about all my little squirrels."

"Mama." She swung around.

Mama wrapped her paws around her and gave her a big hug. Then she sniffed the air. "I smell rain. It'll be here in an hour or two. Do you

need someplace dry to stay for the night?”

“I’ll be okay.” She could lie in the grass with the cold rain soaking her. Lightning and thunder could flash and boom all around her, and she’d be perfectly happy. Any weather, absolutely anything coming down from the sky, would be better than being stuck starving in the awful human nest.

“I’d like for you to stay with me, and I’ll need your help for a lot longer than just one night,” Mama said.

“You want me to come back to the hollow tree?”

“I had seven babies in my litter. I can’t take care of that many at once.”

Seven babies. Wow. Squirrels usually had three or four babies at a time, five at the most. But Mama had a lot more.

“They need a responsible big sister to help them grow up, and I need someone to help me out and babysit.”

“I can really move into your nest with you?” This was her dream come true, what she wanted more than anything in the world.

“Yes.” Mama smiled at her. “I’m sorry I didn’t check on you to make sure you were okay. With all the babies, I never get any sleep or eat enough food, so I’m always tired and crabby. If you live with me until the babies are ready to be on their own, next spring the tree will be all yours.”

Pippi didn’t know how anyone could take care of that many little squirrels, but it couldn’t be any worse than almost starving and trying to avoid getting trapped by humans. She definitely had plenty of bedtime stories to tell the babies. She grinned. Maybe Lana could help her babysit.

“Sure, Mama. I’ll live with you. No matter what Max says, your nest is better than the one in the human building.”

“I say you’re right,” Max said. “And you, Pippi, are braver than Uncle Louie. You’re braver than me. In fact, you’re the bravest squirrel ever!”

### **About the Author**

When two squirrels moved into Sara Shafer's attic, she went on a quest to figure out what they were doing. She knocked on the ceiling, and they scratched back. Imagining what they thought and felt, she wrote *The Bravest Squirrel Ever* and then continued their adventures with *The Bravest Squirrel in the Forest* and *The Bravest Squirrel in School*.

Although her attic is currently vacant, the squirrels outnumber the humans in her neighborhood and could decide to take over at any moment. She watches for signs of invasion as she plots more stories of squirrel bravery.

For fun squirrel facts and other books by Sara Shafer, visit her website at <http://www.SaraShafer.com>.

## **The Bravest Squirrel in the Forest**

Everyone thinks Max's sister is braver than he is, and he's sick of it. He's determined to prove he is the bravest squirrel ever. He devises a plan for the humans to trap him, so he can rescue his Uncle Louie.

But things don't go according to plan. First, he is forgotten in the cage and sprayed by a skunk. Then he is dumped out of a truck and abandoned in the forest with a hungry coyote hot on his trail.

Max has to give up being brave and beg others to help him. When he has the chance to save Uncle Louie or risk his life to save a friend, suddenly Max discovers just how brave he really is.

## **The Bravest Squirrel in School**

Lana has no interest in being brave like her brother and sister. However, she would like to be cuddled by a human, as long as another squirrel is nearby to keep her safe and rescue her.

But the plan goes horribly wrong. She ends up in a school bus full of children with no other squirrel to take care of her. Inside the school, she is discovered by a crowd of children who think she is a toy to poke and toss around.

With no one coming to rescue her, Lana needs to stand up for herself against the playground bullies and figure out a way to get back home. If she's not brave enough to rescue herself, she'll be stuck in school forever.